Volume IV.
Number 9.

Week of
April 5, 1943

New York

THEATRE CRITICS'

Reviews

1943

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†"Oklahoma!" opened Wednesday, March 31st, at the St. James Theatre.
†"Ziegfeld Follies" opened Thursday, April 1st, at the Winter Garden Theatre.

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Theater Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELGERAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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Published by

CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS 235 East 22nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Yearly Subscription
$15.00

"Ziegfeld Follies"

NEW YORK TIMES
April 2, 1943

The 'Ziegfeld Follies', With Milton Berle, Arthur Treacher et al. Opens Broadway Run at the Winter Garden Theatre

By LEWIS NICHOLS

THE CIRCUS and the "Ziegfeld Follies" being two changeless traditions of the American theatre, the Messrs. Shubert and associates last evening upheld their end by bringing in the latest edition of the familiar revue. It opened at what Mr. Berle called the "Olsen and Johnson National Bank"—which is the Winter Garden—and it gave every indication of staying there as agreeably as the other recent "Follies" have, and other Winter Garden shows. For it is the typical changeless revue to which nothing much new has been added, nor from which none of the virtues of the old have been taken away. It comes out and suggests to forget your troubles, and then goes on to provide the means for doing it. The formula has been successful before and probably will be again.

* * *

As staged by John Murray Anderson, it is a fast-moving show in which sketches follow song numbers, beautiful girls parade across the stage and a chorus of dancers cut intricate designs. Miles White has costumed it well, with the touch of tinsel that is the tradition of the "Follies." It seeks to offer a vast quantity of material without dwelling too pointedly on any one part, and it goes its way without a hitch, singing mainly good songs, taking part in sketches that as usual find some better than others and generally living up to the expectations of the Winter Garden. It offers no surprises, but none are needed.

Credit this edition of the "Follies" with a comic in the manner of the "Follies." Milton Berle is a funny fellow, and luckily he is into everything. He plays sketches about rationing, he is the proprietor of a lunch counter in an argument with a customer, he is a parody of Noel Coward and the terrific fifth member of a quartet of tumblers. When there is nothing formal lying about for him to do, he settles down for casual, extemporaneous talk with the audience, and that is funny too. He has a brash, casual humor which goes perfectly with the disjointed show which is a revue.

* * *

There are others also. Out of the movies has come Ilona Massey to sing a number of songs and to be beautiful besides. From the same place has come Arthur Treacher, who unfortunately hasn't a great deal to do. Dean Murphy, the demon impersonator, goes through his excellent list from Willkie to Roosevelt, and Jack Cole has some moments of the inspired, angular dancing for which he is quite properly renowned. Since every "Follies" has at least one discovery, let it this time be Sue Ryan. Up from vaudeville, Miss Ryan has a gay, brassy manner which can turn with equal ease from a song to a sketch; she and Mr. Berle have the same spirit and casualness of manner.

At the top of the program is a line describing the "Follies" as "A national institution glorifying the American girl." That's it. The institution last evening seemed to be in a normal state.

NEW YORK SUN
April 2, 1943

'Ziegfeld Follies,' Big, Funny and Costly, Opens at Winter Garden

By WARD MOREHOUSE

THE wily Shuberts, in the Broadway of long ago, astonished the theatrical world by leasing the American Horse Exchange at the way-uptown corner of 50th Street and converting it into a glittery playhouse called the Winter Garden. They began doing big-scale musical revues, and here they are still at it after thirty-two years.

Now the Messrs. Shubert, in association with Alfred Bloomingdale and Lou Walters, have brought to town their new "Ziegfeld Follies," the first since 1936, and it was unfolded last evening before an audience that overflowed to the sidewalk in front of Lindy's. This new production, to my notion, can be summed up thus: It's big, brazen, costly, crude—and very funny in spots. I suspect that it will be a whopping hit.

Milton Berle is head man. It's all Berle most of the way. Now, Berle is a fellow who can get in the hair of many a playgoer. Some may detest him; others may want to slap him. Some may resent him. But the man is funny. At times, I thought, tremendously so. And it's Mr. Berle who sets the pace for this new "Follies."

It's a talented and certainly an expensive troupe that they've assembled as co-workers for a production that was such a hit in both Boston and Philadelphia that it chased Olsen and Johnson out of the Winter Garden and all the way to 46th Street. Such people as Arthur Treacher, Ilona Massey, Jack Cole, Sue Ryan and Tommy Wonder. Well, the sketch material in this new "Follies" is rather on the shabby side and Mr. Treacher therefore suffers. Miss Massey, beautiful to gaze upon, is somehow lost in the proceedings. Jack Cole's dance routines, particularly "The Wedding of a Solid Sender," are eerie and fantastic—and exceptionally well done. Sue Ryan is a hard worker and a hearty clown, a performer of genuine talent.

Tommy Wonder is there, too, and so is Nadine Gae. Looking like brother and sister, they dance with their usual zest. Katherine Meskill brings dramatic training and an attractive stage presence to several sketches, and Dean Murphy comes along in a solo number with his excellent imitations.

The best of the sketches in this new "Follies" is "Counter Attack." Of the musical numbers, the most popular is likely to be "Come Up and Have a Cup of Coffee." There is a nice swing to the "This Is It" number, with Arthur Maxwell and Imogene Carpenter singing and Tommy Wonder dancing. The busy Sue Ryan has several songs, "Back to the Farm" probably the best of them.

The first half of this new "Ziegfeld Follies" is better than the second. The costumes of Miles White are excellent throughout and John Murray Anderson has given his experienced hand to the direction. The fact that a lot of money has been spent on this new production is apparent all the way.

So put down this new "Ziegfeld Follies" as something that is more in the tradition of the "Passing Shows" than in that of Ziegfeld. The late Mr. Ziegfeld wouldn't approve of all of it. Al Jolson would dismiss it as a dressed-up "Priorities." And Gaby Deslys and the immortal Castles, Vernon and Irene, probably wouldn't understand a word of it.

But it's my prediction that this first "Follies" in seven years is going to have a wallop at the box office. As one veteran first-nighter remarked last evening, it's something for which the tired welder has been waiting.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
April 2, 1943

New 'Follies' Is 6 or 7 Floor Shows With a Hot Spot Trim

"Ziegfeld Follies," a musical revue in two parts, assembled by the Messrs. Shubert, in association with Alfred Bloomingdale and Lou Walters. Produced by the Messrs. Shubert with John Murray Anderson as supervisor.

★ ★ ★—

By BURNS MANTLE

WHEN I was leaving the Winter Garden last night, owing to circumstances over which I should not have exercised the least control, even if I had had it, Milton Berle and Katherine Meskill were playing the one about the newly-weds who arrived in Washington just after the passage of the loveless Tuesday bill. They kept the room, however, until 6 o'clock Wednesday morning, and then the groom was arrested for having moved without notifying his draft board. The new "Ziegfeld Follies" is liberally sprinkled with that type of humor, which will indicate to old Winter Gardeners that the new "Follies" is quite in the familiar groove that has helped the super-burlesques through many successful seasons.

Last night's enthused reception would also indicate that the old Winter Garden crowd is positively hungry for the girls and the gags, the tunes and the jive dances that go with them. Despite the threat of priorities, I may also assure you that this is the handsomest of recent Garden revues. The Miles White costumes are particularly lovely.

Quantity Show

I would not be honest, however, if I did not star it as entertainment on quantity rather than quality claims.

Mr. Berle is one of the smartest of the patter monologists, and one of the most industrious. To me, at least, he is not a character comic in the Ed Wynn or Willie Howard sense. He is much funnier when he plays straight than he is when he labors for grotesque effects.

I have read that the comedian held out as long as he could for a "book" show rather than a revue. His promoters would have been awfully wise if they had let him have his way. Last night he was most amusing when he made his entrance as one of the chorus men. Much funnier than he was when he made up as an idiot and sang with the Ben Yost Vikings. He did much better as a food rationer than he did as an acrobat; for all his sketch material was soggy.

Six Floor Shows

There is enough established talent used in support to furnish at least six floor shows and a couple of large back rooms. A pleasant prima donna is Ilona Massey. A couple of amazingly skillful dancers are Tommy Wonder and Nadine Gae.

Arthur Treacher is wasted. Sue Ryan does her best with the coarser songs. Christine Ayres is a parading show girl de luxe. The Rythmaires sing well and Dean Murphy does so nobly by a Roosevelt-on-the-air imitation that he stirred the crowd unexpectedly.

John Murray Anderson, as usual, does well with the stage pictures, though I'm afraid he hasn't kept very close watch of recent trends in this division. Too much circus work, perhaps. The same is true of the usually inventive Robert Alton with the dance patterns.

It is a huge show; the girls are lovely; Berle has his friends, and Billie Burke gets a cut for the use of the Ziegfeld name. So probably everybody most intimately concerned is happy.

"Ziegfeld Follies"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
April 2, 1943

A Famous Name Is Taken in Vain

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"WHO'D have thought," said Moss Hart to Lillian Hellman and me before last night's show, "that we'd see another *Follies*?"

"What makes you think," said Miss H., "that we will?"

I am not absolutely prepared to state that none of last night's jokes ever appeared in any *Follies* of the great New Amsterdam era—in fact, most of them may have. But beyond that it may be safely attested that the *Follies* of yore and the *Follies* of yesternight have nothing in common. Though the present revue must be conceded its Ilona Massey and a good enough chorus, it cannot be said, in any majestic sense, to glorify the American girl. Nor to recapture the showmanship, the rollcall of talent or the pleasures of song that went into the *Follies* we still talk about. Perhaps we talk about them too fondly, but from now on I shall talk about them much more fondly still.

The truth is that this *Follies* is a very lavish and incredibly lacklustre job right up the Shuberts' alley, but definitely not up mine. Milton Berle is on hand in large amounts, which is not the best way to enjoy Mr. Berle, who has more of a once-or-twice-an-evening charm. He also is on hand without benefit of new jokes or funny sketches; so that while he can raise a laugh, he also re-raises and re-raises it until everyone drops out. The show's sketches, as a matter of fact, have an extraordinary penchant for two topics: rationing and butlers. The assortment of butler skits can be explained by the presence in the cast of Arthur Treacher; but the million or so rationing numbers can be ascribed only to some quite unfathomable fixation.

* * *

There is also the finely wrought Miss Massey, whose singing is a pleasure to watch; such dancers as Nadine Gae and Jack Cole; and Sue Ryan, a newcomer to the musical stage, who can do pretty well with a song. All the songs in the show seem remarkably alike and equally unmemorable. There are the usual big spectacle numbers, which serve to feature the show's one real asset: the costumes are gorgeous.

If the *Follies* is shepherded through the springtime, no doubt it will make a good enough hot-weather item for the local and visiting trade that settles for lavishness, and corn. But it's a very third-rate show, whatever its title; one might as well hope to give glamour to Sixth Ave. by calling it Washington Sq.

'ZIEGFELD FOLLIES'

Revue in two parts, produced by the Messrs. Shubert, in association with Alfred Bloomingdale and Lou Walters; staged by John Murray Anderson; presented at the Winter Garden Thursday, April 1, 1943. The cast includes:

Milton Berle, Ilona Massey, Arthur Treacher, Jack Cole, Sue Ryan, Christine Ayres, Nadine Gae, Tommy Wonder, the Rythmaires, Jack McCauley, Katherine Meskill, Bill and Cora Baird, Ray Long, Charles Senna.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
April 2, 1943

Shades of Ziegfeld

By HOWARD BARNES

THE new "Ziegfeld Follies" is a rowdy and prodigal show. In keeping with the revue traditions of yesteryear it has a full quota of good-looking girls, nimble dancers and specialty numbers. Fortunately the Winter Garden offering also has Milton Berle. As chief clown of the entertainment he gives it a comic buoyancy which is never very apparent in the material. Since he romps exuberantly through sketches, production numbers and even a tumbling turn, all is well with this latterday Follies. Handsomely staged by John Murray Anderson and ornamented with an elegant decor, it can be put down as a comparative blessing of the spring season.

* * *

This fellow Berle does extraordinary feats in the musical. Although I must confess that I have never liked him before, he gets and richly deserves rousing applause for making a thin show frequently funny. From his first entrance in the chorus boy line, through sly monologues and straight comic scenes, he bolsters up tired old situations and frayed jokes. Without him most of the material in "Ziegfeld Follies" would be pretty hard to take. Some of it still is. But he picks up the proceedings after each sagging interlude.

* * *

It is a pity that his versatility has stopped at the straight antics. For the most disappointing feature of the revue is its music and there is almost no one on hand to make the songs seem brighter than they are. Ray Henderson and Jack Yellen have done no better than the sketch writers to make the show something more than a parade of feminine charms. Ilona Massey and Sue Ryan do most of the singing, in respective sweet and hot vocalizing, but they do not put many of them over. The dancers fare better, under Robert Alton's direction, contributing swift and striking patterns to the production.

* * *

The principals, in addition to Berle and Miss Massey, include such a knowing performer as Arthur Treacher, who helps out in some of the more trying moments, but rarely has an opportunity to register his quiet comedy. Tommy Wonder and Nadine Gae whirl through specialty dance routines; Jack Cole does some fancy stepping in a jive wedding number and Dean Murphy is on hand with his brilliant impersonations. Then there are Bill and Cora Baird, giving a fetching puppet show; the tumbling Jansleys and a number of other hard-working revue experts. With such a wealth of material you can't very well go wrong on "Ziegfeld Follies," if you fancy the old-fashioned revue formula. Milton Berle and the comely girls are chiefly responsible, though, for a rewarding entertainment.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
April 2, 1943

Milton Berle, Ilona Massey and Arthur Treacher Head New Stage Revue

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE the Messrs. Olsen and Johnson have moved their arsenal down to the 46th St. Theatre, the Winter Garden has been demobilized, the smoke of "Sons O' Fun" has cleared and into the resulting peace and quiet the Messrs. Shubert stepped last night with a new edition of the "Ziegfeld Follies." The new show belongs fairly enough in the Winter Garden tradition of revues. It is large, lavish, opulent and optical, full of beautiful girls in and partly out of beautiful costumes, and it is inhabited, to a noticeable degree, by Milton Berle. Anyone with reasonably good eyesight is bound to get his money's worth, and a customer with a touch of deafness, suitably intermittent may find it so much velvet.

As a topical revue the show is naturally concerned with timely topics and hence devotes much of its energy to the pertinent matters of food rationing and jive, and such Broadway war problems as hiring a butler and air raid wardening.

Bizarre Bizet

It will take a careful reference to coffee in a song called "Come Up and Have a Cup of Coffee" as a starter and work the stage up to a brilliant study in browns in costumes so artfully designed by Miles White that it is easy to forget what the number is about in the visual pleasure of merely looking at it.

It will bring up the subject of "Carmen," by way of light conversation, and from there on churn up the stage in the zoot-suited frenzies of bizarre Bizet. From these examples you may get the general idea. It is a rather general idea.

The dancing is by far the best of it, since the girls are young, fetching, and brightly up to Mr. Alton's most energetic routines. Nadine Gae and Tommy Wonder are excellent in duet footwork and Jack Cole performs with his customarily brilliant eccentricity in two of the best dance numbers—the first a frantic item called "The Wedding of a Solid Sender" and the second an Oriental oddity that is both peculiar and provocative.

While the songs do not stop the show, or even exactly slow it down, they are pleasantly sung, when they are on the romantic side, by Ilona Massey, and done amusingly, when so intended, by Sue Ryan. The Jansley's provide a brief bout of acrobatics, in which Mr. Berle gets himself involved, much as the eminent Mr. Wynn once did with far funnier results on this same stage with a pair of tumblers. Bill and Cora Baird present some delightful puppets, and Dean Murphy turns up with a faceful of impersonations—two or three of which are notably good.

Look of the Month

This leaves us with Arthur Treacher and Mr. Berle—the Mr. Treacher with the noble nostril appropriately uplifted, as if he had just detected his material.

Mr. Berle, of course, is a different problem. As his own best friend and worst enemy he is equally bland and exuberant. He can be enormously funny when he is working directly at the audience—catch as catch can—with his anthology of jokes, his refusal to take "No" for an answer, and his calm disregard for the ancient and decrepit.

But his sketches are more frantic than funny and the best, I suppose, is a burlesque of Noel Coward's "Private Lives" done in the manner of "Hellzapoppin." Though Mr. Berle's flesh is always willing his comic spirit is often weak. There is something almost valiant, and certainly disarming, in his devotion to his gags, whether good or bad, and when he is good he is very funny indeed because at his best he adds some brazen quality of his own even when the material is reminiscent. With the assistance of a major comic his work would probably be more effective.

But the "Follies" are plainly intended as an excursion for the eye, and as such the show is lavishly successful, or, if I may borrow thus early in April one of my own very old gags, the look of the month.

"Ziegfeld Follies"

NEW YORK POST
April 2, 1943

Milton Berle in the "Ziegfeld Follies" at the Winter Garden

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE new "Ziegfeld Follies," full of six-foot showgirls and Milton Berle, arrived last night at the Winter Garden where orchestra seats for the premiere brought the modest price of $8.80 each.

It was lyrically explained in the opening number that the new "Follies" is designed purely as escapist entertainment, to take the public's mind off its woes. Thus anybody who attended under the impression that he was about to see abstruse drama of the Impressionist School was given fair warning, in time to scram before Mr. Berle came prancing in with the chorus men and began cutting up in the customary Burlesque fashion.

Almost immediately he spied Tommy Manville out front and pulled the familiar one about not being able to see whether he was sitting in the eighth row with his sixth wife, or in the sixth row with his eighth wife. The show was on.

Before the evening was over we had good reason to be grateful for the presence of Mr. Berle, who kept popping up in unexpected places, in the middle of a tumbling act, or as one of the virile male sextet billed as Ben Yost's Vi-Kings.

The Vi-Kings, uniformed as if they had just stepped out of "The Prisoner of Zenda," started warbling into a microphone and were joined in their caroling by a down-at-heel creature with very few teeth who turned out to be Berle in one of his crack-pot moods. With a ghastly grin he confided to the audience that he was a professional blind date.

Mostly Milton Berle

As J. Pierswift Armour, the frock-coated butcher, he was flanked by a couple of bodyguards with tommy guns while opening the safe to deposit a porterhouse steak. In an Olsen and Johnson version of Noel Coward's "Private Lives," he played "I'll See You Again" off key and maintained a cool British reserve while "Hellzapoppin" raged around him.

This may give the impression that the new "Ziegfeld Follies" is largely Milton Berle, and that is correct. What it would be without him we shudder to think. He may not be the most devastating comedian in the business, but he provided much-needed comic relief last night, for the new "Follies" is very short on amusing sketches, not overly long on music, and several of its top-billed personalities are either hopelessly balked by poor material, or unable to do very much anyhow.

Dean Murphy and Sue Ryan

Among the tangible assets, along with the ebullient Mr. Berle, are Dean Murphy, a remarkable mimic, who gives startling impressions of everybody from Bette Davis to President Roosevelt, without using any special make-up and hardly stopping to catch his breath between impersonations; Sue Ryan, a rowdy vaudevillian, with plenty of bounce and gusto, who has a way with a comic song; Jack Cole, Nadine Gae and Tommy Wonder, whose dancing was always expert and a joy to watch amid the mediocre skits and the soporific songs, and such specialists as the Jansleys, a troupe of tumblers, and Bil and Cora Baird, with their amusing puppets.

Katherine Meskill and Jack McCauley certainly deserve some sort of medal for carrying on through all those sketches with or without benefit of Berle, and ordinarily Arthur Treacher, the perennial butler, is one of our favorite frozen faces, but even Mr. Treacher can't be very funny with the material at his disposal.

Miss Ilona Massey, the blonde film actress, who is making her Broadway stage debut in this production, is doubtless very good in films.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
April 2, 1943

Berle Gives Boost to Ziegfeld Follies

By BURTON RASCOE

THE Messrs. Shubert sought, at the Winter Garden last night, to honor, in their humble way, the memory of the late Florenz Ziegfeld by calling the show which opened there the Ziegfeld Follies. The program says they have an "arrangement" with Mrs. Billie Burke Ziegfeld, the impresario's widow, to do this. The Messrs. Shubert are kind and sensitive gentlemen. Their "arrangement" with Mrs. Ziegfeld must have been that she was never to see it.

For I suspect that when Mr. Lee Shubert inspected the show out of town and saw what John Murray Anderson had done with the money he and his brother and the Messrs. Alfred Bloomingdale and Lou Walters provided he must have uttered the anguished cry, "My God—I said Flo Ziegfeld, not Billy Minsky!"

That would have been an exaggeration, of course, though justified by the circumstances. Comparison with the noisier and more vulgar of the Scandals which George White used to put on annually would be nearer the mark. For this show must have cost just dozens of dollars more than a Minsky show for talent alone, not counting costumes by Miles White, some of which are quite stunning. (Regulations regarding expenditures for scenery must have handicapped Watson Barratt severely; much of it looks as though it came from Cain's storehouse without much retouching.)

• • •

Music Is Raucous

The music, by Ray Henderson, is raucous and unrhythmical; it is largely scored for percussion instruments. I find that the one hit song, untitled, about a girl who works in a defense plant, and sung by Sue Ryan (who must at one time have been an understudy for Beatrice Kay in the Gay Nineties Revue in radio), was not written by Mr. Henderson and Jack Yellen, who are credited with the music and lyrics, but by Dan White and Buddy Burston, who are not mentioned in the extensive list of credits for the production.

The satirical sketches by Ray Golden, Sid Kuller, Lester Lawrence and William Lawrence for Arthur Treacher are simply unbelievably obvious, crude, cheap and witless. They make one of the best of movie comics almost pitiable. (Mr. Treacher, by the way, had a dispirited look which I don't think was assumed for comic effect.)

Now we come to the saving merits of the show. They may be summed up in the name Milton Berle. I laughed at Mr. Berle's antics from the first scene, in which he appears unobtrusively as a member of the chorus, until he steps out at the conclusion of the dance as a sort of master of ceremonies and general factotum of comedy on through his nearly every appearance. And I laughed very heartily. But I hastily admit that many of the things I laughed at I shouldn't have laughed at in mixed company; that some other things I laughed at were not intrinsically funny but funny only because Mr. Berle said them, and still some other things he said were simply too repulsive to arouse any merriment in me. By facial expressions and gestures he can make things as flat and crude as "That was Lee Shubert's teeth falling out" (when a slight crash inadvertently occurs behind the backdrop) seem very laughable to some. Also in the ermined and jeweled audience last night there were many who thought that some of his dreariest outhouse jokes were wows.

• • •

Cleaning Needed

If you like that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing you like, and I have no doubt that Mr. Berle and Christine Ayres, a cootch dancer, alone could pack 'em in at the Winter Garden for months on end. But don't say I did not warn you that several of Mr. Berle's sallies are badly in need of what he calls "cleaning 'em up." . . . Mr. Berle is so talented and ingratiating a comic I wish his mother woud wash his mouth out with lye soap and disinfectant every time he gets home from the so-called Ziegfeld Follies.

Other awards of merit as I see them go to: Imogene Carpenter for her singing of This Is It, with Arthur Maxwell; the dance Dixie Roberts (the best terpischorean in the show) does to the music of Come and Have a Cup of Coffee; Nadine Gae and Tommy Wonder, who score a hit in the same number; Bill and Cora Baird for their puppet show, and Dean Murphy for his imitations of Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Mrs. Roosevelt, Mr. Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie and Charlie McCarthy, but not for his Joe E. Brown and Katharine Hepburn, which are pretty poor.

Besides these there are six singers called Ben Yost's Vi-Kings, who may be able to sing all right but last night they sang into an overcharged amplifier that nearly split my ear drums; a ballet dancer named Jack Cole whom the audience seemed to like but I didn't; and a troupe of acrobats called the Jansleys. No trained seals or dog acts.

The only things that remind you of Ziegfeld are the pretty and shapely show girls and the cute and pretty ponies of the chorus. But their training doesn't.

I am sorry, my dear Messrs. Shubert, but that's how I feel. Besides you'll probably make scads of dough out of the show just the same.

"Oklahoma!"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
April 1, 1943

'Oklahoma' Links the Ballet With the Prairie Beautifully

"Oklahoma," musical play based on Lynn Riggs' "Green Grow the Lilacs;" music by Richard Rodgers; book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, 2d. Produced by the Theatre Guild at the St. James Theatre, New York, March 31, 1943.

★ ★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

OKLAHOMA," which the Theatre Guild brought to the St. James Theatre last night, is a combination of Lynn Riggs' "Green Grows the Lilacs" and Agnes de Mille's "Rodeo" ballet, if you can picture the combination. And a mighty sweet joining of the arts of drama and the dance.

With the songs that Richard Rodgers has fitted to a collection of unusually atmospheric and intelligible lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d, "Oklahoma" seems to me to be the most thoroughly and attractively American musical comedy since Edna Ferber's "Show Boat" was done by this same Hammerstein and Jerome Kern.

It has color, and rhythm and harmony plus. It is held to the native idiom and kept sufficiently clean to give it standing in the Western country from which it springs. And it has been modestly but handsomely staged by the Guild.

Ballet and Drama

There may be some little objection advanced by subscribers who have little liking for the modern ballet. They may insist that the dance numbers dominate both the drama and the songs.

If there is this objection it will be no cause for worry on the producers' part, because ballet fans, whose numbers have increased amazingly these last few years, will more than make up for it.

The Rodgers score, and the Hammerstein lyrics, both a definite departure in form for these writers, are the really dominant feature of the production. Two of them come at the very start of the action and practically "stop the show" before it is begun.

These items are the hero's introduction, "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," and "The Surry With the Fringe on the Top," something pretty fine in the way of a dialogue number fitted into the story.

These are no sooner out of the way than one of the minor principals partly talks an adventure song of a recent trip he has made to Kansas City, which establishes a comedy standard that is agreeably different. And right after that a comedienne's lament, "I Cain't Say No," completes the capture of a surprised audience.

About this time you will naturally be looking for one of those I Love the Moon and You ballads. You won't get it. In its place another story number called "People Will Say We're in Love."

Different Detail

A dramatic interlude, with the villain, of all people, becoming emotional over the picture of his own timely end, and before you know it, a dream sequence finishes the act excitingly. In this the heroine goes both lyrical and dramatic while Miss De Mille's gifted substitutes dance out her vision beautifully without disturbing the continuity in the least.

I give you this detail to show you that "Oklahoma" really is different—beautifully different. And as a prelude to the admission that thereafter the succession of surprises is less frequent.

There are worthy numbers in the last third of the entertainment, but the magnificent beginning is never again quite equalled in attraction.

The singers and dancers are also a part of the happy surprise. Alfred Drake, who has acted and sung hereabout a good deal the last couple of seasons, has never found so happy a role as that of Curly, the romantic cowhand in "Oklahoma." His modest voice is admirably suited to the prairie type of tune.

Joan Roberts, who has sung mostly in the West, and much in St. Louis at the Municipal Opera, is charmingly fitted to the role of Laurey, the heroin who loved a cowhand but was sought after by a nasty fellow who live t in a smokehouse papered with art in the nude. Joan will not be going back to St. Louis very soon, if Broadway managers are smart.

Betty Garde has a short but important part. Lee Dixon doubles nicely in song and dance. Joseph Buloff plays a Persian peddler with as much gusto as permitted. Celeste Holm is happy in her first musical comedy role, and Howard da Silva is the bad boy.

The excellent ballet is headed by Marc Platt and Katharine Sergava, and they were great favorites last night, as they should have been.

The scenic background by Lemuel Ayers has a sweeping Thomas Benton quality that is pleasing, and Miles White's costumes are original and colorful. Rouben Mamoulian did the staging, and with fine judgment.

'OKLAHOMA!'

"Oklahoma!" musical play, based on "Green Grow the Lilacs"; music by Richard Rodgers; book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d; staging by Rouben Mamoulian; presented at the St. James Theater Wednesday, March 31, 1943. The cast:

Aunt Eller	Betty Garde
Curly	Alfred Drake
Laurey	Joan Roberts
Ike Skidmore	Barry Kelley
Fred	Edwin Clay
Slim	Herbert Rissman
Will Parker	Lee Dixon
Jud Fry	Howard da Silva
Ado Annie Carnes	Celeste Holm
Ali Hakim	Joseph Buloff
Gertie Cummings	Jane Lawrence
Ellen	Katharine Sergava
Kate	Ellen Love
Sylvie	Joan McCracken
Armina	Kate Friedlich
Aggie	Bambi Linn
Andrew Carnes	Ralph Riggs
Cord Elam	Owen Martin
Jess	George Church
Chalmers	Marc Platt
Mike	Paul Shiers
Joe	George Irving
Sam	Hayes Gordon

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
April 1, 1943

The Guild's Oklahoma Opens at the St. James

By BURTON RASCOE

THE Theater Guild, once so austerely intellectual and aristocratic, has joined the march of democracy, let down the bars to a musical show—and has a hit on its hands. With its Oklahoma, which opened at the St. James last night, the Guild has combined some of the best features of the ballet at the Met with some of the best features of the great tradition of Broadway's own indigenous contribution to the theater—a girl show with lovely tunes, a couple of comics, a heavy, pretty costuming and an infectious spirit of gayety and good humor.

Oklahoma is fresh, lively, colorful and enormously pleasing. Richard Rodgers has written for the show one of the finest musical scores any musical play ever had; Russell Bennett has orchestrated it with a touch of genius, and Jacob Schwartzdorf wields the baton over the musicians who play it with all the zest and finesse of a proud symphony orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

Next to Mr. Rodgers, however, must stand the amazing Agnes de Mille, whose choreography, carried out to perfection by her ballet, is actually the biggest hit of the show. Miss de Mille has already won fame with her ballet, Rodeo, which made the attempts of Les Six of Paris in the '20s to modernize the ballet seem amateurish and mechanical; but she has two numbers in Oklahoma—danced to the music of the songs, Out of My Dreams and All 'er Nothin'—which are such supreme aesthetic delights as to challenge anything the Met can produce this season. They are spine-tingling, out of this world.

* * *

Why No Encore

(I have a quarrel with the stage manager about the first of these numbers. In spite of the audience's excited and insistent applause at the end of Out of My Dreams, he permitted no encore and, moreover, allowed only the principals, Katharine Sergava and Marc Platt, of the ballet number to take bows. These two were fine, of course, but there was one of two girls, who appears from the program to be either Rhoda Hoffman or Rosemary Shaeffer, who was the outstanding hit of this outstanding hit of the show. She was the girl who danced the part of the awkward country girl with such sprite-like and unutterable charm and grace.)

Among the principals, Celeste Holm simply tucked the show under her arm and just let the others touch it. This is an astounding young woman, Miss Holm. It seems that only a few weeks ago she was doing a straight part exceedingly well in The Damask Ch e as a guilefully meretricious lady of the the-ter whose morals were those of the alley fence; and here she shows up as an excellent comic, and still an eyeful, with an ear-caressing voice. When you see and hear her sing the rather naughty song, I Can't Say No, you are in for a tickling thrill. And you just wait for her next number, which happens to be All 'er Nothin', a bell-ringing hit, both as a duet which she sings with Lee Dixon and as a ballet number in which Kate Friedlich and Joan McCracken (who are delightful as can-can dancers in Out of My Dreams) score another triumph. Miss Holm, with her fresh beauty, has too much talent to be quite credible.

* * *

A New Barflies' Lament

Besides those already mentioned, the others featured in the production are: Betty Garde, as the heroine's aunt, a sort of Ma Pettingill; Alfred Drake, as the cowhand who finally wins the heroine from the foul clutches of the sinister ranch manager; Howard da Silva, as the ranch manager who has a habit of burning up the homes and barns of people who don't like him; Lee Dixon, as the boobish cowhand who wants to marry a girl who can't say no even to a Persian peddler; Joseph Buloff as the peddler; Joan Roberts as the heroine, and George Church and Ralph Riggs for reasons not apparent to me, although they played their tiny bits well enough.

Mr. da Silva, as the heavy, not only combines to give the role both a repellent and a comic aspect but also to sing Poor Jud (with Mr. Drake) in such a way that it will probably become a barflies' lament overnight, and amateurs will soon be rendering it whenever you let them. Mr. Buloff was fairly amusing and Mr. Dixon was an appealing Oklahoman in voice and person.

The joy of the production, however, is in its total effect. The girls are unusually fresh, pretty and lively; they wear fetching costumes by Miles White, who has discovered that old-fashioned lace drawers can be more seductive than a G-string; and they dance and sing with abandon. The lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2nd are bright and amusing. There is nothing mechanical about the production which is directed by Rouben Mamoulian. Lemuel Ayres is very Thomas Hentonlish in his settings, but the locale (Oklahoma when it was Indian Territory) calls for it. The plot is allegedly derived from Lynn Riggs' Green Grow the Lilacs. What plot?

"Oklahoma!"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
April 1, 1943

It's Right Nice In Oklahoma

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

OKLAHOMA! is a little more than a musical comedy without being pretentiously so. Based on Lynn Riggs' *"Green Grow the Lilacs,"* it is a folk musical laid at the turn of the century, for which Richard Rodgers has written one of his most charming scores, and into which Agnes de Mille has introduced some picturesque and lively dancing, and a very good first-act-finale ballet. The whole show has just enough of an old-fashioned period quality to be pleasantly refreshing.

The book, to be sure, is just one of those things, if that, and the comedy is neither subtle nor extensive. But they play so minor a part in the evening's business that they can play an equally minor one in this review. *Oklahoma!* — for the record — tells of the trouble a couple of nice guys in cowboy boots have in winning a couple of pretty farm girls. A comic peddler and a villainous hired man provide the competition, and dutifully scram at the stroke of 11. For regional color, there's a box social, Lemuel Ayers' very attractive sets, and an assortment of ten-gallon hats.

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Mr. Rodgers' score is agreeably varied, but the bulk (and the best) of it is well on the romantic side, with plenty of melody and warmth *People Will Say*, and *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning*, sing themselves rapidly into your memory, and *The Surrey With the Fringe on the Top* has a gay and humorous lilt. Mr. Rodgers' ballet music is full of color; *I can't Say No* is a good comic ditty; *Pore Jud*, an amusing mock-mournful one; and *Oklahoma* is one of those lusty anthems that the whole cast rolls up to the roof. Mr. Hammerstein's lyrics have less crispness and wit than Lorenz Hart's at their best, but the songs in *Oklahoma* call for less sophisticated words, and Mr. Hammerstein has found very likeable ones.

Miss de Mille's dances have style, and a personality of their own; and her ballet—though I wasn't crazy about the end of it—has freshness and variety, and enough humor to keep it from turning fancy.

Joan Roberts is pleasant and pleasant-voiced as one of the heroines and Celeste Holm (though she can't sing) amusing as the other. As the more prominent of the two swains, Alfred Drake is engaging and capable, with the right voice for his songs. Joseph Buloff shows his comic skill by making the peddler amusing without much help from the book.

Oklahoma is just different enough to add something special to Broadway's musical lif .

NEW YORK TIMES
April 1, 1943

'Oklahoma!' a Musical Hailed as Delightful, Based on 'Green Grow the Lilacs,' Opens Here at the St. James Theatre

By LEWIS NICHOLS

FOR years they have been saying the Theatre Guild is dead, words that obviously will have to be eaten with breakfast this morning. Forsaking the sometimes somber tenor of her ways, the little lady of Fifty-second Street last evening danced off into new paths and brought to the St. James a truly delightful musical play called "Oklahoma!" Wonderful is the nearest adjective, for this excursion of the Guild combines a fresh and infectious gayety, a charm of manner, beautiful acting, singing and dancing, and a score by Richard Rodgers which does not do any harm either, since it is one of his best.

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"Oklahoma!" is based on Lynn Riggs' saga of the Indian Territory at the turn of the century, "Green Grow the Lilacs," and, like its predecessor, it is simple and warm. It relies not for a moment on Broadway gags to stimulate an appearance of comedy, but goes winningly on its way with Rouben Mamoulian's best direction to point up its sly humor, and with some of the Agnes de Mille's most inspired dances to do so further. There is more comedy in one of Miss de Mille's gay little passages than in many of the other Broadway tom-tom beats together. The Guild has known what it is about in pursuing talent for its new departure.

Mr. Rodgers's scores never lack grace, but seldom have they been so well integrated as this for "Oklahoma!" He has turned out waltzes, love songs, comic songs and a title number which the State in question would do well to seize as an anthem forthwith. "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," and "People Will Say" are headed for countless juke-boxes across the land, and a dirge called "Pore Jud"—in which the hero of the fable tries to persuade his rival to hang himself—is amazingly comic. "The Farmer and the Cowman" and "The Surry with the Fringe on the Top" also deserve mention only because they quite clearly approach perfection; no number of the score is out of place or badly handled. The orchestrations are by Russell Bennett, who knows his humor and has on this occasion let himself go with all the laughter he can command.

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To speak and sing the words—Oscar Hammerstein 2d contributed the book and lyrics—the play has an excellent collection of players, none of whom yet is world-famous. Alfred Drake and Joan Roberts as the two leading singers are fresh and engaging; they have clear voices and the thought that the audience might also like to hear Mr. Hammerstein's poetry. Joseph Buloff is marvelous as the peddler who ambles through the evening selling wares from French cards to Asiatic perfume—and avoiding matrimony. Howard da Silva, Lee Dixon, Celeste Holm and Ralph Riggs are some of the others, and Katharine Sergava and Marc Platt are two of the important dancers. Possibly in addition to being a musical play, "Oklahoma!" could be called a folk operetta; whatever it is, it is very good.

NEW YORK POST
April 1, 1943

"Oklahoma!" the Theatre Guild's New Musical Play at the St. James Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

AFTER a mild, somewhat monotonous beginning, the Theatre Guild's new musical play, "Oklahoma!" suddenly came to life around the middle of the first act last night and grew steadily more entertaining as the evening progressed. It is something a little different as Broadway musicals go these days, presenting a gay and colorful picture of life in the Indian Territory at the turn of the century, just before it became the state of Oklahoma.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d, who have never collaborated on a musical before, although both have labored in the field for years with other partners, went back to Lynn Riggs' play about the cowboy and the farm girl, "Green Grow the Lilacs," for inspiration.

The Guild has brought Rouben Mamoulian back from Hollywood to stage their handiwork, engaged Agnes de Mille to arrange the choreography for several amusing ballet interludes, and called in Lemuel Ayers to design some decorative scenery in the Grant Woods manner, and Miles White to dress everybody as quaintly and colorfully as the period permits.

The Villain Still Pursued Her

Old fashioned homespun charm is the keynote of the production from the time the curtain goes up, and for a while last night it all seemed just a trifle too cute. For some reason known only to the producers, a flock of Mr. Rodgers' songs that are pleasant enough, but still manage to sound quite a bit alike, are warbled in front of Lauley's farm house, one after another, without much variety in the presentation.

It was all very picturesque in a studied fashion, reminding us that life on a farm is apt to become a little tiresome.

We were heartily glad when the scene finally shifted to the smokehouse where Howard da Silva, the lecherous villain of the piece, lurked, surrounded by feelthy peectures.

When Alfred Drake as Curly, the engaging cowboy who had been singing his head off up in the farm yard with the women, started telling the villainous hired-hand what would happen if he hanged himself and had a bang-up funeral, things began to look up at once, and Act I ended with a well staged dream-ballet by Agnes de Mille's dancers featuring a knock-down-and-drag-out fight between hero and villain—a sort of ballet version of the climactic scene from "The Spoilers"—and some insidious luring by a troupe of fancy-women right out of one of those dear old Western saloons where everybody used to get shot up at least once every reel.

The second and final act was an improvement on the first dramatically and several vigorous ensemble numbers gave variety and movement to the performance. By the time Curly and Laurey were married and everybody was out shouting the title song, 'Oklahoma!" we were having a very good time.

Mr. Rodgers' music, much of it in the folk-song style, is invariably pleasant and will grow on you as it is played and replayed. Mr. Hammerstein has done a workmanlike job of adapting Mr. Riggs' play after that first dull stretch, and his lyrics are often bright and amusing.

Well Acted, Nicely Sung

The cast is on the whole very capable, although some of the players have singularly little to do. Alfred Drake, who carries the heaviest vocal burden, again proves that he is equally at home as actor and singer. His is no tremendous voice, but it is a warm baritone, intelligently used. As always, he gives a very attractive performance.

Playing opposite, Joan Roberts is delightfully youthful and beguiling as the fair Laurey. She not only sings nicely but is uncommonly successful in the straight dramatic scenes. Howard da Silva makes an excellent villain, while Joseph Buloff and Celeste Holm have a merry time as the chief comedians of the evening, and Lee Dixon and Betty Garde are always helpful. The solo dancing is entrusted to the capable hands, or rather feet, of Katharine Sergava, Marc Platt and George Church.

If "Oklahoma!" is an example of what the Theatre Guild can do by detouring into the musical field, perhaps it would be a good idea to stay there for a while. It is the most original and entertaining production the Guild has sponsored in a considerable time.

"Oklahoma!"

NEW YORK HERALD-TRIBUNE
April 1, 1943

Lilacs to "Oklahoma"

By HOWARD BARNES

SONGS, dances and a story have been triumphantly blended at the St. James. "Oklahoma!" is a jubilant and enchanting musical. The Richard Rodgers score is one of his best, which is saying plenty. Oscar Hammerstein 2d has written a dramatically imaginative libretto and a string of catchy lyrics; Agnes de Mille has worked small miracles in devising original dances to fit the story and the tunes, while Rouben Mamoulian has directed an excellent company with great taste and craftsmanship. Is it any wonder, then, that this Theater Guild production is one of the most captivating shows of the season?

Plots are generally a nuisance in musical comedies, but the narrative line in "Oklahoma!" is arresting and even dramatic. It is based on the Lynn Riggs play of a dozen years ago, "Green Grow the Lilacs." That work, as I remember it, was lean on substantial subject matter for a straight play, but it has been transmuted into a brilliant frame for songs and dances. The melodrama which Riggs invented for the Indian Territory at the turn of the century has been given exciting elaboration at the St. James, with the vocalists and the dancers picking up the threads of the fable unerringly.

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The point is that everybody concerned with this new offering has conspired to make it a striking piece of theatrical Americana as well as a series of musical-comedy numbers. The songs stick to the outline of the frontier tale in both theme and mood. The ballets and production numbers give it an irresistible flavor. "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'," "People Will Say" and "Out of My Dreams" are going to be heard a lot, but less-featured Rodgers tunes, such as "Pore Jud" and "All 'er Nothin'," keep the proceedings at the St. James tremendously refreshing.

So many scenes are so good after "Oklahoma!" gets off to a rather slow start that it is difficult to single out any one of them for special commendation. The ballet at the end of the first act, when the heroine dreams of a fight between her cowboy lover and the smokehouse villain who has what were known in 1900 as designs on her pretty person, is a superb piece of musical choreography. That between the hero and the villain in the smokehouse is a brilliant short dramatic scene with a perfect song for the incident. The "Oklahoma" number of the climax is a knock-out and a picnic tableau is something to see.

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There are no particularly well known performers in the piece, but that is all to the good in a show which has inherent theatrical excitement. Alfred Drake is first rate as the cowpuncher and Howard da Silva is equally fine as the smokehouse skunk. Joan Roberts makes an attractive heroine and Betty Garde is splendid as her rough-and-ready aunt. Meanwhile, Joseph Buloff has some wonderfully funny scenes as a Persian peddler in the western wilds and Marc Platt is particularly striking among the dancers. Lemuel Ayers has designed exactly the right settings for the production. They had to be good to go with this superb musical.

NEW YORK SUN
April 1, 1943

'Oklahoma!' Brings Rodgers & Hammerstein Melodies Into the St. James

By WARD MOREHOUSE

BACK in the mid-Twenties the Theater Guild found the trick of doing a song and dance show and last night, for the sixth time in its history, this organization came forth with musical entertainment. Now the play is "Oklahoma," fashioned from Lynn Riggs's "Green Grow the Lilacs."

It was Richard Rodgers, we older settlers of the flatlands of Manhattan recall, who provided that bright score for the Guild's original "Garrick Gaieties" and now they've turned—"they" meaning Miss Helburn and Mr. Langner—again to Mr. Rodgers for music, to Oscar Hammerstein 2d for book and lyrics and to Rouben Mamoulian for stage direction. The result is a happy one.

"Oklahoma!" has great charm. It is fresh and diverting. It is inclined to undue slowness at times and monotony creeps in, but it recovers, and by the time they're singing the lusty title song near the finish you're under the spell of it.

Lynn Riggs, in his successful folk play wrote of Indian Territory just after the turn of the century—of an era when Claremore was just a cowpath and Tulsa wasn't a great deal more; when the country of his childhood was a land of alfalfa and barley and rye, of cowpunchers and mustangs, and when people still talked of the Eighty-niners and the excitement of the Run.

Now the Guild has taken the Riggs fable of that great untamed country, his story of the love of Cowboy Curly for the beautiful Laurey—taken it and called in the Messrs. Rodgers and Hammerstein for tunes and words, Mr. Mamoulian for his magic groupings, Agnes de Mille for her dance patterns and Lemuel Ayers for the scenery. And you have "Green Grow the Lilacs," with all the trimmings—and with such fetching songs as "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and "The Surrey With the Fringe on the Top."

There are attractive people in this "Oklahoma!" Such as Joan Roberts, Alfred Drake, Lee Dixon, Celeste Holm. Miss Roberts is a delight in her Southwestern ways. Call her a find, and it's all right. She is both vocal and ornamental. Perhaps Lynn Riggs, and certainly Edna Ferber, would know if there's anything really like her down in the Cimarron country. Last night was her Broadway debut as far as most of us are concerned, although it seems she appeared here in the short-lived "Sunny River." Now it's Broadway's job to keep her here—and to have Hollywood lay off.

Celeste Holm handles her comedy songs with great effect and proves that she can adjust herself to the musical stage as well as she can, say, to "The Damask Cheek." The drawling Lee Dixon is an agreeable performer. Joseph Buloff is funny and so is Ralph Riggs. Howard da Silva is very good indeed. Betty Garde should have more to do.

"Oklahoma!" is charming and leisurely. And tunely. And certainly not topical. It's of an era in American life before anybody ever heard of Gabes or Sfax—and probably only vaguely of Tunisia. It reveals Mr. Rodgers, shorn only for the moment of Larry Hart, in good form indeed. And nobody in last night's audience seemed to have a better time than Mr. Hart himself, who applauded the proceedings from a seat in Row B.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
April 1, 1943

Theatre Guild Gives Musical Version of Lynn Riggs' 'Green Grow the Lilacs'

By JOHN ANDERSON

WHEN the Theatre Guild goes gay anything can happen—sometimes the best and sometimes the worst, but from the uproar of welcome at the St. James last night there was no mistaking the fact that in "Oklahoma" the Guild has a beautiful and delightful show, fresh and imaginative, as enchanting to the eye as Richard Rodgers' music is to the ear. It has, at a rough estimate, practically everything. Even Guild First Nighters, suspected for years of not having hands, applauded.

Though the horse has recently returned to fame, both on the streets and on the menu, no one could have guessed (as did the astute Guild) that the horse's late companion, the cowboy, would achieve a similar urban popularity.

"Oklahoma" is about cowboys and their girls, so the home-state of Will Rogers herewith makes its second gift to Broadway. Actually the show is based on Lynn Riggs' "Green Grow the Lilacs," a folk play of the Indian territory days of 1901, which never had the success is deserved when the Guild did it without music and dances these years ago.

Delightful Score

Now the second Oscar Hammerstein has turned Mr. Riggs' play into a light and colorful libretto, and written the lyrics for Mr. Rodgers' music. Lemuel Ayres has tossed out a stage-ful of handsome scenery, suggesting the wide, windswept, rich rolling land of Grant Wood paintings and Agnes de Mille has inserted some superb dances into the proceedings with the fine energy of splashing movement, and the boldness of fresh design, all helped by Miles White's brilliant costumes.

But it is Mr. Rodgers, I suspect, who puts the spell on the evening with a score that ranks with his best, from the frank exuberance of "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," as the curtain raises, to the lovely duet, "People Will Say"—of which for all I know, Joan Roberts and Alfred Drake may still be trying to persuade the audience that it has had enough.

Besides these there is a resounding and full-throated title song, celebrating the glories of the Oakies homeland, and such amusing numbers as "I Can't Say No," "All 'er Nothin'" and "Pore Jud."

None of it has either the routine sight or sound of the usual showshop patchwork. Rouben Mamoulian has managed to give the whole thing the gaiety and freshness of the material, and has caught the simple as well as the picturesque quality that suggest the Broadway equivalent of vivid, semi-frontier days.

Excellent Cast

Miss Roberts and Mr. Drake are ideal for the principal parts, not only because of their singing, but because they, too, add to the easy, natural, folksy atmosphere. Celeste Holm and Lee Dixon, as the comic love interest, help considerably and Joseph Buloff is enormously amusing as the Persian peddler. Betty Garde is excellent as Aunt Eller, and there are admirable smaller performances by Ralph Riggs, and Howard daSilva, Marc Platt and Katharine Sergava are the principal dancers and they execute the ballets with much grace and distinction.

Though I would gladly have sat up with the show all night it does need cutting, for the first act is too long, but I imagine it would be safer to cut throats than lay the blue pencil to it.

The Guild is probably too busy, anyway, just cutting capers. Or even a rug.

"The Family"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
March 31, 1943

Slavs in Exile

By HOWARD BARNES

VICTOR WOLFSON has done no more than half a job in his adaptation of "The Family." He has set the characters of the Nina Fedorova novel on a stage and he has recaptured much of the book's peculiar atmosphere. At the same time, he has failed to ignite the material. For long stretches, the proceedings at the Windsor fall into an aimless and static literary pattern, as one is introduced to a group of exiles in Tientsin. When the plot thickens, the action is so explosive as to be disconcerting. A more judicious blending of background color and melodramatic excitement was in order.

* * *

The characters are certainly fascinating enough to have deserved more artful dramatic construction. From the Russian granny, holding a group of desperate exiles together with matriarchal dignity to the drunken Englishwoman, who has exiled herself from humanity, the people on the Windsor stage are worth watching. Since the latter part of the action takes place to the accompaniment of Japanese guns and bombers, there is an inevitable tension to the exposition. What is wanting is the explicit arrangement of material to give the work theatrical force.

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The sub-plots for example, have a way of intruding themselves on the central theme of family unity. Even the final happy resolution of the several near tragedies recounted does little to pull "The Family" into a clear focus. And by that time you are likely to be rather weary of the frustrations and tribulations under dramatic discussion. Bretaigne Windust has tried to pull the various skeins of the piece together in his staging, but it takes a lot of off-stage bomb bursts for him to do much beyond letting the characters sit around and talk.

* * *

The company does more than author or director to give the drama definition and meaning. Carol Goodner is extremely good as the dipsomaniac, who gets back on a track of sanity after being with good people in "a crisis. Lucile Watson plays the wise Granny with depth and power and Evelyn Varden is fine as a buxom and boisterous fortune teller.

* * *

Then there are Arnold Korff, doing his best with the badly written part of a half-crazed Russian scientist who keeps writing to kings, presidents and dictators; Elisabeth Fraser, contributing a fresh portrayal of a Russian adolescent, and Nicholas Conte, as her embittered brother. The family emerges in "The Family," but in a scrambled continuity.

NEW YORK SUN
March 31, 1943

'The Family,' New Play by Victor Wolfson Opens at Windsor Theater

By WARD MOREHOUSE

OSCAR SERLIN, the showman who brought "Life With Father" from the Maine woods to Broadway, and who has since sent it to the cities, towns and whistle-stops of the land, gave New York a new play last night—an uneven and curiously jumbled play that is called "The Family." It is at the Windsor.

"The Family" is the work of Victor Wolfson, the same Mr. Wolfson who wrote an engaging comedy six years ago in a piece entitled "Excursion." His new play is based on the novel by Nina Fedorova. It is played by a cast that includes some of the theater's first-rate talents. But the combined efforts of author, producer, director—in this case the frequently brilliant Bretaigne Windust—and company are not sufficient to provide an evening in the theater that is more than spasmodically interesting.

Certainly there is a little of everything in "The Family." There are characters in great variety, but I found it difficult to focus attention on any particular phase of the story or any particular character, not even Granny. And Granny, matriarch of this family of exiled White Russians, is kindly, wise, sententious, and chuckling, and played with customary skill by Lucile Watson.

The scene of "The Family" is the British concession of Tientsin, China; the time is 1937. Penned together and scrimping along in a run-down boarding house are members of Granny's brood, and those they've taken in. You meet the extraordinary Mrs. Parrish, Englishwoman given to hard drink; Peter, who finally escapes to Russia; the sad and sonorous old Professor Chernov, and the fortune-telling Mme. Militza, from whose cards there can be no secrets. There are grandchildren about, too, and a young-love romance. There is a Chinese lodger who lives down the hall and five Japanese roomers who are forever marching upstairs and down. Sounds of war come to Tientsin by the end of the second act; when the play ends Granny and her exiles are awaiting the Japs. There is no other place for them to go.

"The Family," as a novel, apparently had genuine power; as a play it wavers and wanders. There are as many sub-plots and suggestions of plots as I've seen piled into a play since Mary Boland did "Women Go on Forever." I never felt that Mr. Wolfson, as playwright, and Mr. Windust, as director, ever really got together.

Lucile Watson, a tonic in the Broadway theater since her Clyde Fitch days, has had better roles than the Granny of Mr. Wolfson's play. Carol Goodner plays the tumultuous and alcoholic Mrs. Parrish and has a good time with many of the scenes. Her moments with Nicholas Conte are her best and, I suspect, the play's best. Elisabeth Fraser is pretty and appealing in a part that gives little value to the script. The fortune teller of that excellent actress, Evelyn Varden, gets very tiresome before the evening is over.

For that matter, however, several of the characters are definitely on the tedious side. I fear that "The Family," for all of the patience and attention bestowed upon it by both Mr. Serlin and Mr. Windust, does not come through as sturdy stage material.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 31, 1943

'The Family,' a Drama of China, Has Its Compelling Moments

"The Family," drama by Victor Wolfson, based on a novel by Nina Fedorova. Produced by Oscar Serlin at the Windsor Theatre, New York, March 30, 1943.

★ ★ ★—

By BURNS MANTLE

I SUSPECT Oscar Serlin, who produced Victor Wolfson's "The Family" at the Windsor theatre last night, has a strong feeling for the home circle and a vigorous loyalty favoring family solidarity.

He probably saw in "The Family" something of the same cementing sentiment that led to his production of the Lindsay-Crouse dramatization of the Clarence Day stories which resulted in "Life With Father."

He even may have happy recollections of the Kaufman-Hart "You Can't Take It With You," which introduced a likeable but erratic family group and made a fortune for its promoters.

In any event "The Family" has touches of the same appealing quality that drew many thousands to see these plays, and entertained them hugely after they were drawn.

It is filled with bustle and confusion, tempered with scenes of sentimental value; it is studded with sharply drawn characters that are not too smoothly fused with the whole, but each one of which has solid theatrical worth.

Russians in China

The story is of a group of White Russians who find themselves in the British concession of Tientsin, China, in 1937. Without funds, they open a boarding house and attract a mixed assortment of guests.

These include a German scientist and his baffled wife, who believes her husband may be going insane because he insists on pleading for the brotherhood of man in a warring world.

A Russian fortune teller who loses trade because she tells the truth. Five mysterious Japanese gentlemen who turn out to be spies, and a single Chinese gentleman who keeps watch of them.

Finally there is an English woman cursed with a shrill determination to be a dipsomaniac, who becomes increasingly amenable to the influences of the family.

Not having read the popular story from which Mr. Wolfson extracted the play, but having been warned that he would like to have his work judged as being based on, rather than adapted from, that work, I get the impression that he helped himself to as many incidents as he could reasonably use, but still felt a little worried for fear he had not taken the best of them.

There is that crowding of incident and lack of completely satisfying explanation that follows any dramatized work. But there is also enough of the incidents used to give a strong hint of the strength of the original material.

Nice Family

Granny spreads love and the homely philosophies of the aging; Mme. Melitza tells fortunes with impressive confidence; Lida, the 17-year-old, finds Jimmy, who is all of 19, and love is born; Peter wavers under temptation and is saved; Mrs. Parrish acts as much like a discouraged harlot as she does like a redeemable English woman, but is saved none the less, and Dima loves his dog and leaves his mother with alarming calmness.

It is all frankly of the theatre, but it is also touched with its author's conviction that the family is the saving social unit in a crazy world, and that only by the spread of the family spirit can the world be saved.

There is, I think, too much bombing in it for its own good, excellent bombing though it is. We know now the sound experts can reproduce a blitz, and we are ready to take the suggestion for the fact. More plays have been bombed out of the theatre this season than have been kept in it by this disturbing bit of realism.

Bretaigne Windust did the staging, and Mr. Serlin has provided him with a fine cast of actors. Lucile Watson is happily and sympathetically playing Granny. Carol Goodner is a shade shrill, but definitely dominant as Mrs. Parrish. Evelyn Vardon has fun with Mme. Melitza. Elisabeth Fraser and a lightly frightened young Bill Lipton are the attractive juveniles.

Arnold Korff fills in the outlines of the professor, Nicholas Conte is mysteriously interesting as Peter, and there are a variety of short parts well played, including one by 8-year-old Alec Englander.

An interesting Chinese interior by Boris Aronson and good lighting by Moe Hack. The audience response was encouraging.

"The Family"

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
March 31, 1943

Prize Best Seller of White Russian Family in Tientsin Dramatized by Wolfson

By JOHN ANDERSON

OUT of Nina Fedorova's prize-winning best seller of two years ago Victor Wolfson has wrought a play of the same name—"The Family," which Oscar Serlin presented last night at the Windsor Theatre. Mr. Serlin has produced it in a manner and with a large cast worthy of his somewhat different domestic comedy "Life With Father," but the result is not nearly so successful. I found the first act engrossing, and part of the second. After that, it seemed to me, "The Family" went heavily to pieces, its drama static and cluttered, its emotions clogged with dialogue. Kissing such a large cast good-bye takes so long that we lose even the poignancy of brave farewells.

Since I did not read the book the play suffers here from no unfair comparison. It stands on its own feet as far as I'm concerned, with the suspicion that it has too many feet to stand on. Perhaps Mr. Wolfson has tried to do too much for too many characters; perhaps with the book in the playgoer's memory his play is more suggestive than it can be without it. But on the stage it seems too congested for easy movement and sharp dramatic focus.

Valiant Family

Yet from the first act it is readily apparent why the material seems so tempting. Here is a family of White Russians, presided over by a grand matriarch, living a valiant but threadbare existence in Tientsin, just before the Japanese attack in 1937.

Besides Grandma, her daughter, and three grandchildren, there is an odd assortment of boarders—an old Russian professor, who spends his time writing desperately reasonable letters to Mussolini, Hitler, and Roosevelt, the professor's wife, fearful that he is going mad, a Chinese secret agent, and a group of treacherous Japs. There is a lady fortune teller, too honest to read the cards for anyone except the very old, and finally a riotous English woman drowning her sorrows in drink.

In this amiable but strange atmosphere of casual relationships Mr. Wolfson, with the help of some excellent performances, is able to make these characters vivid and interesting. They are all exiles, refugees of one sort or another, bound together by the slender thread of British protection in the foreign concession.

But when the thread snaps under a Japanese air raid the situation, instead of being heightened by the common danger, falls loosely apart. The Englishwoman finds something to live for and takes the Russian youngster (once painful reminder of her own dead child) to England for safety. The older son strikes one blow for China and flees to Russia. The others remain, with gallant composure, to face the enemy — without money, without homes, but with hope. The curtain falls on the fortune teller finding in the cards a new combination, the prophesy of victory and peace.

While none of it is exactly implausible, it seems too easy, too plainly fabricated as drama, too pat, too neatly adjusted to the falling final curtain. The attitudes which seemed lifelike and accidental in peace, become studied and a little strained in the pressure of war, against the thunderous thumping of off-stage bombs. The anguish and nobility of spirit are so explicit in words that the tension of imagination subsides, and the emotion is lost in too many words, too many explanations, too much winding up of stray threads of plot. Instead of breaking your heart in the presence of ravaged humanity the play talks itself to death.

'THE FAMILY'

"The Family," play by Victor Wolfson, based on the novel by Nina Fedorova; staged by Bretaigne Windust; production designed by Boris Aronson; presented by Oscar Serlin at the Windsor Theater Tuesday, March 30, 1943. The cast:

Kahn	Joseph Tao Shih
Phillip Stowne	Lowell Gilmore
Dima	Alec Englander
Granny	Lucile Watson
Mme. Militza	Evelyn Varden
Professor Chernov	Arnold Korff
Mr. Sung	Yung Ying Hsu
Lida	Elisabeth Fraser
Tania	Marion Evensen
Anna Petrovna Chernov	Katherine Squire
Jimmy Bennett	Bill Lipton
Peter	Nicholas Conte
Chauffeur	Ronald Dexter
Mrs. Parrish	Carol Goodner
Amah	June Kim
Dog	Miranda
Dr. Isaac	Boris Tumarin
Wah Gay	Kale Deel
Chinese Gentleman Next Door	Ping Yuen Zi

Certainly Mr. Serlin has been generous in its production, not only in Boris Aronson's excellent setting and through Mr. Windust's fluent direction of the play's complicated movement, but in the casting. Lucile Watson gives a superb performance as the old grandmother, warmly humorous, valiant, and finely sustained. Evelyn Varden gets some good fun and good sense out of the part of the fortune teller, in spite of its occasional over-writing, and Carol Goodner plays the lady drunk vividly. Elisabeth Fraser, Nicholas Conte, Arnold Korff, Katherine Squire, Marion Evensen and Master Alec Englander all help enormously.

Sometimes, in such cases, the printed page is brighter than the spotlight. Ink doesn't evaporate as quickly as drama can.

NEW YORK POST
March 31, 1943

"The Family" Produced by Oscar Serlin at the Windsor Theatre

By WILELLA WALDORF

IT HAS been announced that Victor Wolfson's "The Family" is not to be taken as a dramatization of the novel by Nina Fedorova, but as a new play based on the book. Mr. Wolfson could hardly be expected to transfer the Fedorova work in its entirety to the stage, unless he felt inclined to turn out a play considerably longer than "Strange Interlude," and we had rather hoped that he had simply borrowed the central idea of a group of exiles—mostly White Russians—living in Tientsin, China, during the Japanese invasion of 1937, and written a drama of his own about them.

"The Family," as revealed last night at the Windsor Theatre, however, is neither one nor the other. Rather is it a compromise between the two. It does not, of course, begin to cover the ground encompassed in the book, but it does try to reproduce the early chapters, winding up with the Japanese invasion. For dramatic purposes, Mr. Wolfson has touched up some of the characters, notably Peter, and introduced a rather tentative love interest between him and Mrs. Parrish, the Englishwoman whose dipsomania keeps the household in an almost continual uproar in the earlier scenes.

In developing what few dramatic incidents he can, Mr. Wolfson, instead of tossing the novel aside and boldly proceeding to write a new play retaining its background and atmosphere, has endeavored to crowd as much as possible of the early portion of the book upon the stage. What departures and rearrangements he has made are of a surprisingly pedestrian and routine quality.

People Without A Country

It is obvious, for instance, almost from the beginning, that he is going to ring in some sort of love story involving Peter and Mrs. Parrish, since he has them insulting each other every time they meet, a sure sign in the theatre that the author is planning to bring them together later on. Nor did it seem entirely necessary to invent a tragic and sentimental explanation for Mrs. Parrish's unfortunate addiction to hard liquor.

The trouble with "The Family" as a play hinges on the fact that it sticks too closely to the original novel, as far as it goes, and what touching up Mr. Wolfson has done in his capacity as playwright is for the most part uninspired. The net result as far as this reviewer is concerned was to make it seem theatrical and unreal, despite the generally excellent production Oscar Serlin has given the play.

Bretaigne Windust has directed this difficult piece with as much sensitivity and care as if he were dealing with a Chekhovian script, and "The Family" now and then does achieve a faint reflection of the Chekhov mood without ever developing into anything particularly provocative.

Russian Exiles In China

Mme. Militza, the fortune teller, used by Mr. Wolfson as a comic relief and clearing-the-air character, is played with gusto by Evelyn Varden, an actress who invariably manages to turn in an arresting performance no matter what she happens to be involved in at the moment.

Lucile Watson makes an admirable figure of Granny, whose memories of the luxurious pre-Revolutionary days in Russia do not interfere with her determination to build a new home around her in a foreign land. Miss Watson is hardly an overwhelmingly Russian personality, but on the whole little attempt has been made to smother the audience in Russian atmosphere. The icons and the samovars are seldom in evidence.

Oddly enough, however, Marion Evensen as Tania, the mother of the household, not only succeeds in giving a most effective performance in this quiet role, but even manages to seem quite Russian while she is about it. There were times when we thought Miss Evensen, merely standing by without uttering a word, conveyed more of the fortitude and suffering of refugees in a strange land than the play itself ever did.

Carol Goodner as Mrs. Parrish is convincing in a role that might easily be overplayed by an actress of less technical facility and taste. Elisabeth Fraser is fresh and charming as Lida, the young daughter of the house, and Nicholas Conte struggles capably with the unevenly developed role of Peter, a very vague figure indeed in the novel. Mr. Wolfson never seems to have quite made up his mind precisely what he is trying to do with him, and dragging him into a faintly suggested Chinese espionage plot is certainly no help.

In the book, as we recall it, Peter simply answered a call for volunteers to defend the British Concession, took his place in the barricades and after a few weeks when the Japanese took over and things calmed down a bit, returned home with a good round sum of money to swell the family's chronically impoverished exchequer.

Arnold Korff as Professor Chernov, who is not as crazy as the world around him, Katherine Squire as his pathetic wife, young Alec Englander as the youthful Dima, Yung Ying Hsu and Joseph Tao Shih, among the Orientals—all are good, while Boris Aronson's single setting is effectively designed.

"The Family" is something to see as an example of superior stagecraft and performance, but we must confess to a feeling of profound disappointment in the play Mr. Wolfson has fashioned from Mme. Fedorova's voluminous novel.